

## Introduction to:



Composer: Giuseppe Verdi

Language: Sung in Italian with English Surtitles

Accompanied by Piano

At *Opera in the Heights*

Tuesday February 20th, 2018 at 10:30 am

## **OPERA 101: ABOUT OPERA**



### **WHAT IS OPERA?**

The actual word “opera” is Italian for “work”, as in a work of art or work of music. The earliest Italian operas were called several things including *drama per musica* (drama by means of music). This title perfectly defines the genre of opera.

**Opera** is a dramatic work that tells a story entirely through music (or almost entirely through music, depending on the type of opera). Opera was invented in Italy at the very end of the 1500s, and was based on the belief that music can communicate people’s emotions and reactions better than words or pictures. It has been demonstrated that people consistently use music when they want to express something with more than the usual intensity, particularly at moments of great happiness or great sadness.

### **THE STRUCTURE OF AN OPERA**

The large-scale construction of an opera is just like that of a play. It could be anywhere from one to five acts, and last anywhere from 30 minutes to five hours, the usual length being about three hours. The reasons an opera is divided into acts is the same as a play; to give the performers and the audience a rest, to allow the composer and librettist to be able to change the time period or setting for each act, and to give the technical crew time to change the set, if necessary. In an opera there is usually an overture at the beginning (see Anatomy of Opera for all terms), followed by alternating arias, recitatives, ensembles, and choruses through which the story unfolds.

The production team has three major groups that make an opera possible:

**The Performers:** In the pit in front of the stage are the Conductor and the Orchestra. The Orchestra can range from as few as a dozen musicians to over a hundred players, depending on the opera. On the stage are the solo Singers, the Chorus, and in many operas, the Dancers. The Chorus can range from just a few singers to as many as one hundred fifty, depending on the opera.

**The Crew:** Backstage, unseen by the audience, are the Set Crew, Prop Crew, Lighting Crew and Costume Crew. The Stage Manager is in charge of these crews and runs the performance. The Stage Manager gives the cues for the performers to go on stage at the right time, and cues the technical effects. These include the changing of the set and the Props (portable items used in a performance such as books or glasses), the lighting effects and special effects like thunder. The Costume Crew is responsible for getting everyone in costume and make-up and helping the singers change costumes during a performance.

**The Administration:** The Artistic Director of the company is in charge of choosing the performers and designers, the people to prepare and give the performance. The Executive Director and other team members handle publicity, the box office, travel arrangements, finances and fundraising.

### ***THE ANATOMY OF OPERA***

**THE OVERTURE** is a piece of music played by the orchestra at the very beginning of the opera that functions as an introduction to the opera. (In the school-day performance, the overture will probably be skipped over since the orchestra will not be present). The overture generally includes themes that will be heard throughout the opera, and is usually about 5-10 minutes long.

**RECITATIVE** is a type of singing unique to opera, and is used when characters are talking to each other, or introducing an aria or ensemble. The text is sung, though delivered quickly in a musical way that imitates speech, and has a very limited melodic range. Recitative is meant to carry the action forward and can be accompanied either by a full orchestra, or by harpsichord or piano.

**ARIAS**, Italian for “air” or song, are solo songs performed to the accompaniment of the orchestra. They allow the character to express his or her feelings and reflect on the events of the drama. The focus of an aria is emotion rather than action, and provides an opportunity for the singer to demonstrate his or her vocal or artistic skill. Each main character usually sings at least one aria in the opera.

**ENSEMBLES** range from duets, trios, and quartets to long complex works involving many characters. Mozart’s greatest ensembles last 20 minutes! Usually, each act culminates in a large ensemble.

**CHORUSES** supply the crowds and the big settings as well as an opportunity for exciting choral music which is always popular in its own right. Some operas also have choruses of children. The Chorus helps to heighten the drama and are often used at the end of acts.

## THE OPERATIC VOICE

Being an opera singer is hard work! Singers need to be physically strong and have superb technique in order to sustain long phrases and be heard at the back of an opera house: this means they must train for many years to have excellent control of their breath and learn to make their bodies into human microphones! Why? Because opera singers do NOT use microphones, so they must project their voices throughout a whole theatre using only their muscles and technique! This is necessary to achieve the volume required to be heard above the orchestra that accompanies the singers. Additionally, it must always be beautiful ☺

All voices are defined by their voice “type”, based on the range and tone of a singer’s voice. The singer’s voice type will determine what kind of role they will play in the opera. Below are a list of voice types, ranges, and roles commonly found in operas:

### **OPERA VOICES**

(Audio examples of each voice can be heard at  
<http://www.theopera101.com/operaabc/voices/>)



### **Soprano**

The highest of the female voice types, the soprano has always had a place of prominence in the hierarchy of vocal music. In operatic drama, the soprano is almost always the heroine or protagonist of an opera, since a high, bright sound can suggest youth, innocence and virtue.

- Coloratura sopranos are capable of seemingly superhuman feats. The voice is extremely agile, firing out fast paced coloratura sections that ascend as high as the 3rd F above middle C (and in a few cases even higher). These roles have existed from Baroque through 20th century opera. “The Queen of the Night” in The Magic Flute is a prime example of coloratura singing.

### **Mezzo-soprano**

A mezzo-soprano, or mezzo, has a voice lower than a soprano’s but higher than a contralto’s. Throughout opera history the mezzo has been used to convey many different types of characters: everything from boys or young men (so-called trouser or pants roles), to mothers or mother-types, seductive heroines, and villainesses.

**Contralto**

The lowest of the female voice types, it is rare to find a contralto singer, and true contralto roles are few and far between. These roles are usually older women and special character parts such as witches and gypsies.

**Tenor**

The highest of the male voices, the tenor is frequently the hero or protagonist of an opera.

**Baritone**

The baritone is the most common male voice, lower in range than the tenor and with a darker tone. In comic opera, the baritone is often the ringleader of the hijinks, but in tragic opera, he is often the villain.

**Bass**

The Bass is the lowest and darkest of the male voices. Low voices often suggest age and wisdom or evil characters in serious opera, but in comic opera they are often used for old characters that are foolish or laughable.

**More About Voice Types...**

Nearly all of these voice types have subcategories. For instance, a 'soprano' may be any one of the following:

- Coloratura soprano
- Light Lyric soprano
- Lyric soprano
- Spinto soprano
- Dramatic soprano

The subcategories represent the differences in size of voice, color of voice, vocal range and musical/vocal abilities (agility, lyricism etc.) Every voice is unique, possessing its own quality and musical color, and every singer's capabilities are different. Higher, lighter voices are typically more agile and larger, more dramatic voices are used in music that has more powerful sustain. In "The Masked Ball", there are in fact two different types of sopranos, a full lyric soprano (Amelia) and a light lyric soprano (Oscar).

Many opera composers had a favorite voice or voices for which they wrote most of their music. The composer Giuseppe Verdi is credited with codifying the distinction between a 'baritone' and a 'bass'; many of his pieces focused on the baritone voice type over the bass.

## Verdi's "Un Ballo in Maschera" (A Masked Ball)

The Italian title for Verdi's *A Masked Ball* is *Un Ballo in Maschera* (oon ball-oh in mass-care-uh). A Masked Ball is based on a real historical event, the assassination of King Gustav III of Sweden, but is heavily fictionalized. The original historical figures names have also been changed in the libretto of the opera. These are the main characters:

### CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Riccardo**, the King of Sweden. Voice type: tenor

**Renato**, the King's secretary as well as best friend and confidant. Voice type: baritone

**Amelia** (*ah-meel-yuh*), Renato's wife. Amelia and the King are in love. Voice type: soprano

**Oscar** (*OH-skar*) the King's page. Sung by a woman, known as a 'pants role'. Voice type: soprano

**Ulrica** (*oohl-re-kah*), A fortune-teller. Voice type: mezzo-soprano/contralto

**Christiano** (*chris-tee-ah-no*), A sailor whom the King uses to convince a crowd of Ulrica's powers. Voice type: baritone

**Sam**, A courtier involved in a conspiracy to assassinate the King. Voice type: bass

**Tom**, A courtier involved in a conspiracy to assassinate the King. Voice type: bass

### SYNOPSIS

SETTING: Sweden, 1792

### ACT I

#### Scene I

A meeting of representatives awaits Governor Riccardo, including Samuel and Tom, who are conspiring against him. When the governor enters, he notices the name of Amelia, wife of his secretary and dearest friend Renato, on the guest list for a masked ball. He muses about his secret love for her. Left alone with Riccardo, Renato warns the governor of a conspiracy against him, but Riccardo ignores the threat. The young intern Oscar tells the governor about the medium Ulrica, who has been accused of occultism and is to be banished. Deciding to see for himself, the governor arranges for his friends to pay her an incognito visit.

### Scene 2

In a secluded rubbish heap, Ulrica invokes demons and tells the sailor Silvano that he will soon become wealthy and receive a promotion. Riccardo arrives in disguise, and slips money into Silvano's pockets. When the sailor discovers his good fortune, all sing Ulrica's praises. Riccardo hides as she sends her visitors away to admit Amelia, who is tormented by her love for the governor and asks for help. Ulrica tells her that she must gather a magic herb after dark. When Amelia leaves, Riccardo decides to follow her that night. Oscar and the representatives enter, and Riccardo asks Ulrica to read his palm. She tells him that he will die by the hand of a friend, to which he laughs and demands to know the assassin's name. Ulrica replies that it will be the first person that shakes his hand. When Renato rushes in, Riccardo clasps his hand saying that the oracle has been disproved since Renato is his most loyal friend.

## ACT II

That night, Amelia, who has followed Ulrica's advice to find the herb, expresses hope that she will be freed of her love for the governor. When Riccardo appears, she asks him to leave, but ultimately they admit their love for each other. Amelia hides her face when Renato suddenly appears, warning the governor that assassins are nearby. Riccardo makes Renato promise to escort the woman back to the city without lifting her veil, then escapes. Finding Renato instead of their intended victim, the conspirators make ironic remarks about his veiled companion. When Amelia realizes that her husband will fight rather than break his promise to Riccardo, she drops her veil to save him. The conspirators are amused and make fun of Renato for his embarrassing situation. Renato, shocked by the governor's betrayal and his wife's presumed infidelity, asks Samuel and Tom to come to his house the next morning.

## ACT III

### Scene I

In his apartment, Renato threatens to kill Amelia. She asks to see their young son before she dies. After she has left, Renato declares that it is the governor he should seek vengeance on, not Amelia. Samuel and Tom arrive, and Renato tells them that he will join the conspirators. The men decide to draw lots to determine who will kill Riccardo, and Renato forces his wife to choose from the slips of paper. When his own name comes up he is overjoyed. Oscar enters, bringing an invitation to the masked ball. As the assassins welcome this chance to execute their plan, Amelia decides to warn the governor.

### Scene 2

As Riccardo resolves to send Amelia and Renato to England, Oscar brings an anonymous letter warning him of the murder plot. Riccardo refuses to be intimidated and leaves for the masquerade. In the ballroom, Renato presses Oscar on what costume the governor is wearing, which the page eventually reveals. Amelia finds Riccardo, and repeats her warning. Refusing to leave, he declares his love one more time and tells her that he is sending her away with her husband. As they say goodbye, Renato murders Riccardo. .

# The Composer

## Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi was born October 10, 1813 in the village of Le Roncole, which was then part of Napoleon's Kingdom of Italy. It can be difficult to separate fact from fiction in the composer's history, due in no small part to Verdi's own penchant for romanticizing his life. For instance, Verdi enjoyed presenting himself as the son of illiterate peasants, a humble upbringing from which he dragged himself to glory. In truth, his father Carlo was a modest but literate innkeeper, and his mother Luigia a spinner in a textile factory.

They were not wealthy, but both Carlo and Luigia came from families of landowners and traders. Carlo was able to invest heavily in Verdi's education, including private instruction with local priests. On Verdi's seventh birthday, Carlo gave him a spinet. Soon, Verdi was substituting as organist at the local church and became the permanent organist at the age of nine.

In 1823, the family moved to Busseto. The metropolitan area permitted Verdi access to a broader range of educational opportunities and he spent much of his time at the enormous Jesuit library. At age eleven, Verdi entered the *ginnasio* (secondary school) where he received training in Latin, Italian, rhetoric, and humanities. In 1825, Verdi began lessons with Ferdinando Provesi, choirmaster at San Bartolomeo in Busseto and director of the municipal music school and the local Philharmonic Society. Over the next six years, Verdi produced hundreds of band marches, several symphonies, a half dozen concertos, and a number of variations for pianoforte, serenades, cantatas, and church music. His musical ambitions were enthusiastically supported by Antonio Barezzi, a wealthy local merchant and amateur musician. It was in Barezzi's home in 1830 that Verdi gave the first public performance of one of his compositions. In May 1831, Verdi moved into the Barezzi house to act as musical tutor to Barezzi's daughter Margherita. The two fell in love and became engaged.

In 1832, with Barezzi's financial support and the promise of a scholarship Carlo secured from a charitable institution, Verdi went to Milan to complete his studies.



Verdi's application to enroll at the Milan Conservatory was rejected, due in part to his being four years too old and not a Milan resident, but also because of his unorthodox piano technique. Though the young composer was discouraged, Barezzi sponsored Verdi's private study with Vincenzo Lavigna who had for many years been choirmaster at La Scala. In 1834, Verdi assisted at the keyboard in performances of Haydn's *Creation* given by a Milanese Philharmonic Society directed by Pietro Massini. A year later, Massini and Verdi co-directed performances of Gioachino

Rossini's *La Cenerentola*.

In 1836, Verdi returned to Busseto and married Margherita. He directed and composed for the local Philharmonic Society and supplemented his income by giving private lessons. He and Margherita had two children during their marriage, Virginia and Icilio Romano. Both children died in infancy while Verdi was at work on his first opera, *Oberto* (1839). The opera opened to success at La Scala in Milan, and the manager Bartolomeo Merelli offered Verdi a contract for three more works. While Verdi was working on his second opera *Un giorno di regno* (*A One Day Reign*) in 1840, Margherita died of encephalitis at the age of 26. Verdi was devastated by the deaths of his young family in the span of only three years, and his sorrow was compounded by the failure of *Un giorno di regno*. In despair, Verdi vowed to give up musical composition, but Merelli persuaded him to write *Nabucco*. Verdi's third opera opened to critical and popular acclaim in March 1842, and rocketed him to fame.

The fourteen years that followed (which Verdi called his "galley years") saw the composer produce 14 new operas, including *I Lombardi* (1843) and *Macbeth* (1847). During this time he began an affair with Giuseppina Strepponi, a soprano nearing the end of her career who had starred in many of Verdi's operas. Strepponi's demanding performance schedule eventually cost her voice. After being booed off stage in 1845, she semi-retired, confining her performances to roles in Verdi's operas. They married in 1859, and their marriage was a happy one.



Verdi's prolific galley years came to an end around the time of his second marriage. While no longer as productive, the composer went on to compose some of his most well-known operas, including *Rigoletto* in 1851, and *Il Trovatore* (*The Troubadour*) and *La traviata* (*The Fallen Woman*) in 1853. Each of these operas was a magnificent success, and Verdi received a number of commissions from opera houses throughout Europe. Between 1855 and 1867, Verdi composed *Un Ballo in Maschera* (*A Masked Ball*) in 1859, *La forza del destino* (*The Force of Destiny*) commissioned in 1861 but not performed until 1862, a revised version of *Macbeth* in 1865, *Les vêpres siciliennes* (*The Sicilian Vespers*) in 1855, *Don Carlos* in 1867, and *Simon Boccanegra* in 185.

The death of fellow Italian composer Rossini in 1868 spurred Verdi to compose a portion of a requiem to honor Rossini's memory. Verdi's *Libera me* (*Deliver me*) was one of thirteen compositions in a collaborative requiem entitled *Messa per Rossini*. Politics and personal conflict led to the project being abandoned, and the completed *Messa per Rossini* would not premiere until 1988. Verdi revised *Libera me* for use in the *Messa da Requiem* (1874), a memorial composition for Italian writer and humanist Alessandro Manzoni.

While working on the *Requiem*, Verdi composed and premiered *Aida* (1871). The opera was an enormous and instant success. Following *Aida*, Verdi had a relatively quiet period during which he composed for a string quartet and revised several of his prior operas. He composed two new operas during this time: *Otello* (1887) and his final opera, *Falstaff* (1893). Following the run of *Falstaff*, Verdi retired to a country home in Busseto with Giuseppina, who died four years later in 1897.

Verdi spent his last years in Milan, where he was visited regularly by friends and admirers. While staying at the Grand Hotel et de Milan, Verdi had a debilitating stroke. He grew steadily weaker and died six days later on January 27, 1901. Verdi was given a state funeral in which orchestras and choirs throughout Italy amassed to remember him in what remains the largest public assembly in Italy's history.

Verdi's final resting place is the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti, a rest home for retired musicians that Verdi established in 1896. The rest home is still in existence, and was the chief beneficiary of his will. Of the home, Verdi once wrote:

*"Of all my works, that which pleases me the most is the Casa that I had built in Milan to shelter elderly singers who have not been favoured by fortune, or who when they were young did not have the virtue of saving their money. Poor and dear companions of my life!"*



Antonio Barezzi



Margherita Barezzi



Giuseppina Strepponi



Casa di Riposo per Musicisti

# Verdi's Music

Verdi was a composer of the Romantic Era of classical music, dated roughly 1820 to 1900. In Italy, Romanticism in music was dominated by the *bel canto* style as established by Italian composers Gaetano Donizetti and Gioachino Rossini. Verdi's early compositions were influenced by his predecessors, particularly Donizetti. Over his career, Verdi's compositional style became more refined, and he left the well-known conventions of Italian opera in favor of producing highly original and expressive works.

Verdi felt his compositional style was more uneducated than that of his peers, and relied on his natural melodic gift to inform his expression. He fully appreciated the value of the orchestra and used its powers to their full extent. Italian opera had long been dominated by traditional scenic elements, old-fashioned librettos, and emphasis on vocal displays; Verdi dedicated himself to unifying music and drama to tell engrossing stories. The composer was absorbed with plot and had a tendency to micromanage his librettists to ensure that the opera characters and story were brought fully to life.

Verdi's operas have been criticized as overly melodramatic, but the composer freely admitted that his music was aimed at an audience composed of the general public rather than the musical elite. He was very picky about operatic topics, choosing only those tales he believed would engross the audience from first note to last. The composer once declared that his works should be "original, interesting...and passionate; passions above them all!"

Verdi's operas are characterized by quick pacing, emotional extremes, and music that underscores drama and turmoil. Verdi employs duets, trios, and quartets to give the singers the most expressive moments possible. As Verdi aged and experienced more of life, his operas became increasingly unconventional, without the harsh divisions of musical moments common in other works and great continuity in musical moments. In the comic *Falstaff*, his final work, Verdi concludes with a carefree finale: a fugue declaring 'All the world's a joke!'

## VERDI'S MAJOR OPERATIC WORKS

In addition to songs and choral works, Verdi wrote 37 operas during his lifetime. Here is a list of his most important operas:

*Nabucco* (1842)

*I Lombardi* (1843)

*Macbeth* (1847)

*Rigoletto* (1851)

*Il Trovatore* (*The Troubadour*, 1853)

*La Traviata* (*The Fallen Woman*, 1853)

*Simon Boccanegra* (1857)

*Un Ballo in Maschera* (*A Masked Ball*, 1859)

*Don Carlos* (1867)

*Aida* (1871)

*Otello* (1887)

*Falstaff* (1893)

### What's In A Name?

Verdi lived during the Risorgimento, the Italian unification movement. Themes of Italian Nationalism are present in his music. His name was used as a codeword for popular support of the leader of the Unification movement: 'Viva VERDI'. Verdi stands for Vittorio Emanuele, Re D'Italia. The phrase means 'Long live Victor Emanuele, king of Italy'.

## VERDI IN POPULAR CULTURE

Even if you have never been to an opera, you have probably heard some of opera's most famous musical pieces in advertising, TV shows and movies, and in department stores. Doritos's 2012 Super Bowl XLVI commercial "Sling Baby" used the familiar aria "La Donna È Mobile" from Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

*Il Trovatore* has become one of popular culture's most often referenced Verdi works. Gilbert and Sullivan musically spoof the opera's Anvil Chorus in *The Pirates of Penzance*. The Marx Brothers had a particular affinity for the opera, particularly the Anvil Chorus, and it appears in three of their films: as cash register music in *The Cocoanuts* (1929), a humorous piano scene in *Animal Crackers* (1930), and as the operatic scene trying to happen onstage during *A Night at the Opera* (1935).

# Verdi and the Censors

## Getting the Opera to Stage

Verdi spent the majority of his career at war with the censors. He used his operas to express his political opinions, particularly his desire to see the expulsion of the Austrians who ruled Milan and Venice. The subtext of Italian liberation from foreign rule lies in nearly every Verdi opera, particularly his early works. Verdi's allegories of independence, personal liberty, and freedom were much beloved by the Italian citizenry. Verdi and his works often served as a rallying point for the Italian people and the dream of a unified and sovereign Italy, and ultimately led to a lifelong battle between the composer and the censors.

Prior to the establishment of Italy as a nation in 1861, Austrian-imposed law required all ideas for a new opera to be submitted for approval before a libretto could even be written; the libretto would then have to pass scrutiny. Verdi's early operas *Nabucco* (1842) and *I Lombardi* (1843) were approved with little comment by the Milanese censors, but they provoked riots that surprised and horrified city officials. Thereafter, the censors began scrutinizing Verdi's works to the very last note. Occasionally, however, the censors would miss subversive elements. For instance, Ezio, the Roman general in *Attila* (1846) says "Avrai tu l'universo, resti l'Italia a me". The translation—"You may keep the universe, let Italy be mine."—was a direct statement that Italy should be ruled by, and for, Italians. When the censors did eventually catch on, it made Verdi even less popular with them.

In many cases, the only reason Verdi managed to get his work to stage was due to the support of an Austrian censor named Martello, who was an avid opera lover and an admirer of Verdi. Martello compromised with Verdi and negotiated with his fellow censors to maintain as much of Verdi's original material as possible. Martello's power and interference stirred up even more ill-will with the censors, and the powder keg was fully primed for explosion by the time Verdi submitted his idea for *A Masked Ball*.

Regicide was always a hot-button issue in monarchical countries, but raised particular alarm during an era when violent social revolution was poised to erupt. Dreams of democracy were sweeping Europe, threatening the autocracies and the status quo. Everywhere on the continent was rebellion, insurrection, war, and

conspiracy. While *A Masked Ball* was in rehearsal, both King Ferdinand of Naples and Napoleon III narrowly escaped assassination attempts. Antonio Somma, Verdi's librettist, was suspected of involvement in uprisings against Austrians in Venice and was under government surveillance. He eventually penned the libretto for *A Masked Ball* under a pseudonym, either out of fear for his life or because he was furious about the changes to the opera. In this dangerous atmosphere, Verdi made the alterations requested of him by the Neapolitan censors: he made the king to a duke, and moved the action to an earlier historical period. The censors then demanded more changes: that Amelia must be a sister and not a wife, the conspirators could now draw lots, and the murder must occur offstage.

Furious, Verdi refused to obey and withdrew his opera from Naples. He hoped for more freedom from the Roman censors, but met with the same demands with the additional requirement that the plot be moved out of Europe. In danger of losing his opera completely, Verdi had no choice but to bow to the censors. The opera action was relocated to 17th-century Boston and the king demoted to a colonial governor for the English Crown. It escaped everyone's notice that Boston did not become a city until 1822 and that the English Crown never had a governor there while it ruled. In addition to the new setting, firearms were not permitted onstage, and many of the male characters had their names changed.

At long last approved by the censors, *A Masked Ball* premiered on February 17, 1859 in Rome. It quickly became popular, and remained so through the turbulent decade of unification that followed.

By 1870, with the censors deposed and Italy under sovereign rule, Verdi could have returned the opera to its original setting but never did. It continued to be set in Boston until a 1935 staging in Copenhagen which restored the original Swedish elements. It is now more common to see it staged as Verdi originally intended it: in Sweden, with its King.



# Character Assassination

## The Life and Death of the Real King Gustav III

Gustav III of Sweden (1746-1792) was one of a handful of 18th-century rulers known as the Enlightened Despots, monarchs who employed the principles of the Enlightenment—such as religious tolerance, freedom of speech and the press, and the right to private property—to rule their territories. Gustav's reign is overshadowed by those of his relatives Frederick the Great of Prussia, Catherine II of Russia, and Joseph II of Austria, but his assassination has inspired a number of novels, films, and stage works.

When Gustav took the throne in 1771, Sweden's government was awash in corruption. The Riksdag, the Swedish Parliament, held political power and took advantage of Sweden's Age of Liberty to abuse both the monarchy and the common people. The two warring factions of the Riksdag refused Gustav's attempts at reconciliation and partnership. Frustrated, Gustav deposed the Riksdag through a *coup d'état* in 1772 that returned power to the Swedish monarchy and saved Sweden from losing its independence to Russia. Although Gustav's swift action was popular with the people, it rankled many of the powerful ruling nobility. Anger and vengeance followed Gustav throughout his reign.

Though Gustav was not a well-educated monarch by the standards of the era, he was thoughtful and intelligent. He took day-to-day charge of nearly every aspect of his government. During the strongest years of his reign, he re-wrote the Constitution, stabilized the country's currency and grew its dilapidated finances, reformed the criminal justice system, and instituted a new economic policy that gave Swedish merchants better and greater opportunities for international trade. Gustav dealt with the ministers of his government as often as possible, but had a habit of going directly and often secretly to middle- and low-ranking subordinates in order to achieve his goals. This behavior rankled even his supporters and flamed the fires of resentment in his Court.

Gustav held a great admiration for the arts, and his particular love was the theatre. He wrote several plays, and is today regarded as one of the finest Swedish dramatists of his age. He also acted, and commissioned a number of works in which he placed native performers to help bolster their careers. Gustav founded the Royal Theatre in 1773, which included the Royal Swedish Opera and the Royal Swedish Ballet; the Royal Dramatic

Theatre followed in 1788. Gustav's most vital legacies were his contributions to the arts in Sweden, and his dedication to supporting and promoting Swedish artists. His influence is vibrantly apparent in Swedish culture today.

Gustav also paraded his love of the theatrical at Court. He enjoyed the lengthy and complex rituals, parties, ceremonies, and grand attires that went with being King. He wasted a good deal of time and money on cards, and would often hold meetings while embroidering bodices for the ladies of his Court. The nickname given him by history, The Theatre King, refers to both his patronage of the arts and his flamboyant nature. Gustav's costly and pompous indulgences earned him the derision of his enemies, and became a point of contention for those who fell out of his graces (Gustav is said to have cared little for loyalty).

The King's quirks, coupled with his Enlightened philosophy on ruling, made him popular with the common people. The middle years of Gustav's reign are considered the 'golden years', when the Swedish King enacted his most socially progressive legislation and rescued Sweden from becoming a subject of Russia. As his reign continued, Gustav's frivolities at Court, finicky relationships with friends and foes alike, constant battles with the Riksdag, and Sweden's mounting financial debt to France and Russia caused the tide of Gustav's popularity to ebb and flow.

By 1786, Gustav launched efforts to abolish the Parliament and began making decisions without their sanction. In 1788, the King declared war against Russia without the consent of the Riksdag. Russia's military resources were stretched thin by a violent conflict with the Ottoman Empire, and Gustav's strategy was to exploit this weakness. However, the Swedish troops were poorly provisioned and bitterly opposed to the illegality of the war. When the soldiers crossed the Russian border in July 1788, they mutinied. The mutiny was led by aristocratic officers. Gustav managed to rally popular anti-aristocrat opinion and ultimately quash the rebellion.

The Russo-Swedish War (1788-1790) was largely a disaster for Gustav. It left Sweden nearly bankrupt and with little to show for itself other than an annual subsidy from Catherine the Great. Gustav took advantage of the

situation to cast his nobles in a bad light, and presented the Riksdag with a new Constitution stripping them of noble privileges and giving himself an absolute monarchy. When the Riksdag rejected the new Constitution, Gustav ordered that their votes be recorded as “Yes”, an illegal and dictatorial move that cemented the decision of the nobles to depose the King.

The new Constitution gave Gustav the right to declare war without approval from the Riksdag, and he had barely finished with Russia before turning his sights on France. The French Revolution was in full swing, and Gustav positioned himself as the leader of the monarchist opposition to the uprising. Gustav was an impoverished monarch with no powerful European allies, and his attempt to put down the French rebellion was extremely unpopular. The conspiracy among his enemies grew into murderous intent, led by Captain Jakob Johan Anckarström, Count Claes Fredrik Horn, and Count Adolf Ludvig Ribbing.

On March 16, 1792, Gustav attended a masquerade ball at the Royal Opera House in Stockholm. At dinner with friends, he received an anonymous death threat. It was one of many the King had received and he chose to ignore it. After dinner, he went to the masquerade, where half an hour later Anckarström placed a pistol against the King's back and pulled the trigger. The pistol had been loaded with balls, nails, and scraps of lead and iron. Despite the terrible pain, Gustav did not fall, a fact that added to the romanticism surrounding his assassination.

Anckarström was arrested the following morning, and with Horn and Ribbing made a full confession. Horn and Ribbing would be stripped of their nobility and exiled from Sweden; Anckarström would be tortured, mutilated, and executed.

Gustav lingered in agony in his quarters, giving orders about his country and showing little interest in the plotters who had confessed to attempted regicide. The King, told of their confessions, said:

*“I don’t want to know the names ... It is only their political plan I should like to know about, some time or other. I am curious to see whether there was anything sensible in it.”*

Gustav's wound became severely infected, and on March 29, 1792, he died. His final words were:

*“I feel sleepy, a few moments’ rest would do me good.”*



King Gustav III in 1777 (above). The masquerade costume he wore to the Royal Opera House the night of his assassination (below).



# Verdi and Gustav III

## Fact vs. Fiction

The censors demanded so many changes to *A Masked Ball* that by the time it made it to stage, it was no longer recognizable as an opera about the Swedish King Gustav III. Of course, Verdi took liberties of his own with the life of the king.

### Amelia | Fictional Character

The real Gustav III married Sophia Magdalena of Denmark. The marriage was an unhappy one, mainly because Gustav's mother was jealous of Sophia and made life disagreeable for the couple. Gustav later endured rumors spread by his mother that he was not the father of Sophia's first son. These rumors took root because Gustav and Sophia married in 1766, but did not produce their first child until 1778. Whether Gustav's mother was right or just malicious has never been established.

### Count Anckarström | (1762-1792)

The real Anckarström was a minor noble and Captain in the Swedish army who, early in his career, was imprisoned on charges of slandering Gustav III. He was acquitted after a trial and cruel imprisonment. He maintained that the experience sparked his hatred of the king. They did not have a friendship; it is probable they never even met before the night Anckarström shot Gustav.

### Ulrica the Fortune-Teller | (1734-1801)

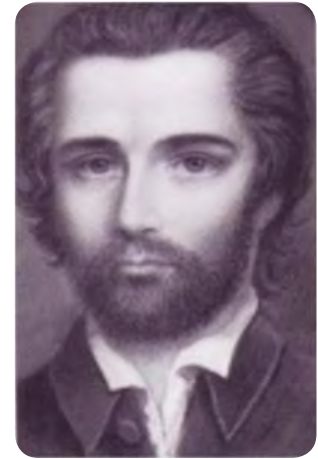
Anna Ulrica Arfvidsson was a professional Swedish fortune-teller, commonly known as Mamsell Arfvidsson. She was the daughter of high-ranking royal palace servants. Her natural intelligence and wide net of informers enabled her to give accurate predictions, and Ulrica became popular with the aristocracy. In 1786, Gustav III came to her in disguise for a reading in the company of Count Jacob De la Gardie. Ulrica warned: *Beware of the man with a sword you will meet this evening, for he aspires to take your life*. It is not known whether Gustav encountered such a man, but when he was assassinated four years later, the authorities interrogated Ulrica. She was never charged with involvement, but it frightened away her clients and she died in poverty.

### The King's Costume

In the opera, Anckarström has to find out from Oscar what costume the king is wearing. Gustav III was easily identifiable to his assassin due to the large silver Royal Order of the Seraphim star worn on his chest.

### The Murder Weapon

In the opera, the assassin uses a knife to stab the king to death. Gustav III was shot. Verdi's original work was true to this historical fact, but the censors would not permit firearms on stage and he changed the weapon to a knife.



Jacob Johan Anckarström



Marian Anderson  
in the role of Ulrica (1955)



Mamsell Arfvidsson read coffee leaves to tell fortunes. Gustav III believed coffee consumption was dangerous to public health, and ordered a scientific experiment be conducted on a set of imprisoned identical twins. Their executions were commuted to life imprisonment on the condition that one twin drank three pots of tea a day for life, and the other drank three pots of coffee. Gustav III was assassinated before the experiment concluded; the tea-drinking twin died first, at the age of 83.



Production photos of A Masked Ball from Lyric Opera of Kansas City

# A MASKED BALL (*UN BALLO IN MASCHERA*)

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## EDUCATIONAL LINKS

### The Composer

- [The National Giuseppe Verdi Museum](#)

### The Opera

- [Vocal Score \(PDF, 14.58MB\)](#)
- [English libretto](#)
- [Characters](#)
- [Synopsis](#)

## ONLINE VIDEO EXCERPTS

- ["Volta la terrea"](#) and ensemble (Oscar; Gustav, Anackrström, and Court)
- ["Re dell'abbisso"](#) (Ulrica)
- ["Teco io sto!"](#) (Riccardo, Amelia)
- ["Morrò, ma prima in grazia"](#) (Amelia)
- [A video slide show of King Gustav III's life](#)

## RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS & DVDS

- CD: [Domingo, Riciarelli, Bruson, Obraztsova, Grubovera, Abbado \(Deutsche Grammophon\)](#)
- CD: [Bergonzi, Price, Merrill, Verrett, Frist, Leinsdorf \(RCA\)](#)
- CD: [Callas, Di Stefano, Gobbi, Barbieri, Ratti, Votto \(EMI\)](#)
- DVD: [Pavarotti, Millo, Nucci, Levine \(Deutsche Grammophon\)](#)

## POPERA CONNECTIONS: VERDI IN POPULAR CULTURE

- Video: [Doritos "Sling Baby" Super Bowl Commercial \(music is "La Donna è Mobile" from Verdi's Rigoletto\)](#)
- Video: [Marx Bros. A Night at the Opera \(opera on stage is Verdi's Il Trovatore\)](#)
- Video: Tiny Toon Adventures [\("The Anvil Chorus" from Verdi's Il Trovatore\)](#)